

Sermon for 1 Christmas

December 31, 2023

(8:00 a.m. Service Only)

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Being an Easter People Renewed by the Christmas Message

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian. 4:4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. 6 And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

John 1:14-18

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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Today we celebrate the first Sunday in the Season of Christmas. Many of us see it as an anticlimax, a time of letdown after the "Big Holiday." Indeed, especially when the First Sunday after Christmas falls on New Year's Eve, as it does this year, this is a day when we're ready to just "pack Christmas up" so we can turn our attention to this evening's New Year's Eve blowout.

As Christians, however, people who mark *our* "new year" from the First Sunday of Advent, we see this Sunday from a different vantage point. For one thing, even though it be something of a letdown from Christmas Day, this day is an Easter feast, after all. Every Sunday, even this one, is a remembrance of the Resurrection. So I'm going to suggest that we put Christmas and Easter together this morning and use our time together today to see the birth of Christ in the wider light of his whole story – to see in Christ not only the babe in the manger, but the one who lived, who suffered, who died, and who lives still.

We celebrate him as Emmanuel – "God With Us," the one who came and walked among us to teach us how to live in this world. This, in turn, forces us to take another look at this world of ours, seeing it as the world into which our Lord himself was born.

Though in many ways the world has changed since our Lord's birth all those years ago, in many ways, the world is just the same. It is world full of sickness and sin that needs the transforming love of Jesus. It is a world that cries out for salvation – even if it more often than not does not know that it even *needs* saving. It is a world reaching out for hope and promise – and one to which we, as God's faithful, can *offer* such hope and promise thanks to the faith we have received.

As "*Christmas* Christians," we experience the blessedness of life given to us by the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. As "*Easter* Christians," we celebrate the eternal life given to us by the victory of Jesus, the Lamb of God. On this day, we place these two themes together and bear proud witness to the power of God to touch and heal and transform. On this day, we celebrate the God of the prophet Isaiah, a God whose spirit led him to bring good news, to bring light into darkness, freedom from bondage, healing from sickness, gladness in sorrow, and alleviation from suffering.

The writer of today's Psalm knew this God, too. His was a God who heals those who are hurting, lifts up the lowly, provides for our needs, rebuilds what has been broken, and establishes peace. All the scriptures we hear today point us to the appropriate response to this loving and powerful God, but none speak more eloquently than the words we hear today from the Gospel of John.

John the Evangelist reminds us that we have received grace upon grace from God's fullness. This richness of life leads us in a twofold direction, as we direct our praises Godward, and seek to make Jesus, the Word Made Flesh, better known in the world. The abundance of God's love overflows in us and impels us to make the Divine Presence known.

But as we meet on this Christmas/Easter feast, we must pause to remember that this is not an easy proposition and never has been. The Bible itself is a testament to the amazing ability of the People of God to just plain "get it wrong." From time immemorial, God's people have used holy writings in unholy ways, and have seriously mistranslated what one would think God was making plain.

When I think of this word, "mistranslation," I am reminded of a story I read some years ago. It speaks of the frustration of General Motors executives, who were trying to sell their most popular North American model in the Latin American market. It was the mid-1970s, and the Chevrolet Nova was flying off the car lots in this country. In Mexico and South America, however, you couldn't beg people to buy it. Why? Well, in Spanish, *no va* means "it doesn't go." Who is going to buy a car that doesn't go?

Another funny story along the same lines has to do with Purdue Farms' famous slogan of some years ago, "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken." Remember that one? Here, too, the translation was botched when they tried to market their poultry south of the border. The Spanish got mangled into something like, "It takes a virile man to produce affectionate chickens."

Paul's letter to the Galatian church, from which we heard a few moments ago, is a prime example of a scripture that for many years became mangled in translation. In his letter, Paul speaks of a people of belief being kept under restraint, kept under the watch of a custodian until they could be trusted with the faith. This passage was, for many years, used by colonial Christians on this continent to justify what they described as the "Gospel Order." Christian legislators created public statutes that forbade enslaved people from coming to Christian gatherings without a watchman present. At worship, they were segregated, largely to balconies or the basement of the church, under the careful watch of an overseer whose job it was to make sure they were taught their "proper place" in the Kingdom of God – people whose Christian birthright was *not* perfect freedom, but perpetual servitude.

In centuries to follow, not only were *Africans* treated in such a shameful way, so were Indigenous Americans, Irish, Chinese, and various other ethnic groups. People in all these communities – and more – experienced what it was to come to these shores and be treated, *by Christians*, as lesser creatures unworthy to worship with their English-ancestry brothers and sisters. If they weren't forced to use galleries or basements, they were segregated into separate ethnic "chapels."

Praise God, we have come a long way since then, but the challenge is not behind us even yet. We still are challenged not to be complacent in the face of realities in which we find ourselves, whether inadvertently or deliberately, setting ourselves as superior to others. Look, for instance, at the situation in Israel and Gaza that has dominated the news in the last three months. We want to stand with the people of Israel as they defend themselves from the heinous acts perpetrated on them last October. But can we turn a blind eye to the suffering of the innocent people of Gaza and other Palestinian territories? If we can watch that kind of massive suffering and not shed a bucket of tears, we run the danger of regarding the men, women, and children in these lands as something less than we are, as people who are not traumatized the way we would be traumatized if thousands of bombs were raining down on us.

We cannot fully claim to be people of both the Incarnation and the Resurrection so long as we value *anyone* else's life less than we do our own. We cannot celebrate the richness of new life in God's creation as long as we regard *anyone* as less than a son or daughter of God, made in the image and likeness of the Holy One.

Just like our Saviour, who brought grace and truth into this world, we are called to make God known in this world through our witness to God's love. As sisters and brothers in Christ, and sons and daughters of the Most High God, we are given the task of standing on the strength of God's love and reaching out to all God's people. We cannot distinguish between rich and poor, American or Two-Thirds World, Israeli or Palestinian, Russian or Ukrainian, black or white, weak or strong. We are

called to recognize in those whose lives embrace a different reality from ours, something that can teach us a great deal about the Providence of God.

Whenever we open ourselves to the Spirit's leading in this way, God works in us to "renew the face of the earth." In so doing, we witness to the eternal newness of life in Christ and the healing power of the community of faith.

And so, today, as we stand on the threshold of a new year in the secular calendar, let us come to the Table of Grace, renewed in our commitment to be an Easter people illumined by the Christmas message. Let us walk in the light of God and seek new opportunities to give and serve that the world might know Christ's Name. Let us dare to believe that peace, righteousness, kindness, decency and wholeness can make a difference in this world.

And then, not pack it up again and put it away until another Christmas rolls around, but open that gift and use it, say it, do it, every day of the new year that is about to unfold.